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ABSTRACT

The interrelationship of performers, text, and audience in reader's theater may be better understood through philosopher Martin Buber's key concepts of polarity, dialogue, and inclusion. These concepts operate within four polar tensions identified by Buber: that between the performer and the character represented; that between the performer and other performers (the protagonists); that between the actors, the text, and the audience; and that between drama itself (as a creation of the author) and the theater (the play/actor/audience relationship). All of the concepts are crucial; together, they are the driving central force of interpretation and reader's theater. (JM)

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MARTIN BUBER'S ESSAYS ON THEATRE:
A Philosophical Look at Theatre of the Mind

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MARTIN BUBER'S ESSAYS ON THEATRE:
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Over ten years ago, Leslie Irene Coger wrote "Interpreter's Theatre: Theatre of the Mind."[1] In the intervening span of time, from the mid-60s to the present, we, as professionals in the field of interpretation, have rarely gone beyond technique and intuition in our utilization of readers theatre in the classroom and in public performance. For the most part we lack understanding and clarity in viewing the performances we put together or judge in festivals and tournaments. Yet readers theatre is done -- often with great success. It is done on a trial and error basis, by the seat of our pants, by intuition. Although we have a number of books, parts of books, and articles which tell us how to select and cut a script, cast, direct, and perform readers theatre,[2] we lack a clear understanding of how it all works. Except for Joanna Hawkins Maclay's work, Readers Theatre: Toward a Grammar of Practice, no work has dealt with the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of readers theatre. Maclay identifies a number of areas in which definition and conceptualization must be provided for greater understanding of readers theatre. The first problem she deals with is the relationship between text and performer, text and director, and text and audience. The next area is that relationship between performer and audience, and lastly, performer with performer. These are all areas in which we have a number of technical answers, some psychological answers (provided by Maclay), and almost no philosophical-theoretical answers. Maclay attempts to provide the latter in her work:

> A grammar of practice is needed -- a body of aesthetic principles that are directly related to the relationships among the performers, the audience and the text -- principles that will serve as guides in the task of featuring the literary text in a performance.[3]

Rather than continue a study of the grammar of practice which Maclay so aptly has accomplished, it is the purpose of this brief paper to begin with a general framework within which Maclay's grammar of practice may later be placed. It is hoped that this paper will further define the term theatre, and develop a conceptualization of the process in which performer, audience and literature are interacting parts in a large dialogue.

The German-Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, provides the modern interpreter with two key concepts around which one might structure the interrelationship of performers, text, and audience described previously. Those concepts are what Buber calls Polarity and Dialogue. Buber, in his essay "On Polarity, Dialogue after the Theatre"[4] identifies four types of polar tensions:

a. That of the performer and the character he represents;
b. That between the performer and other performers (the protagonists);
c. That between the actors, the play or literature, and the audience;
d. That between drama itself (as a creation of the author) and the theatre (play, actor, audience relationship).

The remainder of this paper will be an illumination of these ideas and a discussion of their utility in readers theatre.

Buber developed these ideas more fully in his work "I and Thou" and in a later essay, "Drama and Theatre" (which we shall also discuss), but most important in our understanding of Buber and his writing is that he developed his concept of theatre and drama during the period when he was advising and directing experimental theatre productions in Hellerau and Dusseldorf from before 1911 through 1920 approximately. Not only was he a theatre critic, but in 1913, after some initial problems in Dusseldorf, Buber, Emil Strauss, Jakob Hegner, and the French dramatist, Paul Claudel, founded the Hellerau Dramatic Union, in which Buber experimented with a number of plays and techniques.

Essentially what Martin Buber did between 1901 and 1925 was a direct precursor to his more mature philosophy of "I and Thou." Buber was attempting to explain the dramatic component between people, and between an individual and God. What is important for interpretation and readers theatre is the side-product of his lengthy development of a philosophy of dialogue and philosophical anthropology. This side-product is the idea of polarity or tension through one's "overagainstness" against another.

The first polar tension he describes is that between the performer and the character he represents. Buber observed that the character has certain physical characteristics which are to some extent different from the actor -- and yet they are one and the same.

> The two stood overagainst each other as a pole and opposite pole, being and counter-being, and the actor accomplished his task of inclusion precisely through the fact that he did not weaken this tension.[5]

The actor and the character are wholly different beings. They stand against each other, not in a dominant-submissive relationship, but in a relationship involving dialogue. The key to understanding this relationship is the term <u>inclusion</u>. Inclusion means the total involvement in the standpoint of the other. Buber puts it this way:

> It is the extension of one's own concreteness, the fulfillment of the actual situation in life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates. (One person) without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other.[6]

For the interpreter, then, Buber is saying that one does not take a character on as one might put on one's coat, but rather, the reality that is the individual performer is expressed through the standpoint of the character. This is certainly true even in the situation of narration. When the narrator talks directly to the audience, he is not the performer

alone, but also one who sees the action. This led Daniel, Buber's character in the essay, "Dialogue on Polarity," to the realization that there are two kinds of actors: the genuine actor and the false actor. The genuine actor stands "over and against" the hero or character of the play as the "simulacrum of the deed" or as a simulation or semblance of the character. By standing in opposition to the hero and simulating him, the actor suggests character. If he weakened the opposition by mimicking the character, the situation would be "poisoned."[7]

> That is the paradox of the great actor. Freed, purified, transfigured in the transformation, he realizes the hero in ever-new uniqueness with his soul as with his body.[8]

The paradoxical situation of the actor, at once himself, and at the same time the character of different body and temperament, creates a tension which enables the actor to leave the boundaries of his own self and wander among new roles and new selves within the character. Actor and character are two different entities, yet when placed over and against one another they form a new being, a communicative being living an internal dialogue of tension. The actor does not put on a mask but places himself, "surrenduring his soul and winning it back again"[9] into the center of the hero (or the literature as we might say) and dredges out the basis of what Buber calls a personal kinesis or "the union of meaning and deed peculiar to him."[10] When the meaning is attained by the actor, the deed or action "resounds" in the character.[11]

A false actor, on the other hand, attempts to imitate the character, "fingers the hero with his senses, collects the hero's voice, his mien, his gestures. He explores the world of the doer in order to acquire his material and then constructs out of it a mask."[12]

The second polarity tension revolves around the relationship of the protagonists on stage. Actor overagainst actor, character against character, involves a tension similar to the previous one in form and substance, yet different. The tragedy occurs when the polar tension is created by the interaction between the characters, yet because of the limited resources of each individual character, this tension can never be resolved. Essentially, no two people ever mean the same thing by the words that they use, "that there is, therefore, no pure reply, that at each point of the conversation, therefore, understanding and misunderstanding are interwoven -- from which comes the interplay of openness and closedness, expression and reserve."[13] It is the polar tension based on the difference between people when placed in a capricious situation which leads to tragedy and when placed in a situation involving accident, which leads to comedy.

From the point of view of the interpreter in Readers Theatre, the tension between protagonist is most evident when offstage focus is used because the audience has full view of the gestural and facial response each character gives off. It is important in this instance to emphasize the difference in characters to heighten the tension.

The next polarity involves the relationship between actor, literature, and audience. The tensions in this polarity are many and varied, but essentially we see them as the differences between individuals who happen to be sitting and viewing something on stage through their individual perceptual frameworks and the difference between those individuals who make up the mass of the audience and the characters/actors on the stage. These differences are mediated by the words of the literature, which at once

provide the basis of the simultaneous inclusion and separation of audience and individual, and audience and character/actor. Buber, through the character Daniel, says it this way:

> I knew nothing except just <u>that</u> audience, but <u>that</u> truly and wonderfully.
>
> I had, in fact, experienced what was the first act of my drama not as one of the spectators, but as a secret hierophont; now the crowd of which I was part surprised me and filled me with astonishment as though I had associated with it for the first time. These men had separated themselves out and combined; they had installed in a solitary space, in the solitary time of this stage and accepted its procedure as something allied to them; with different meanings, to be sure, the one stirred the action, the other awareness of the performance, only a few cojoined in that dynamic wholeness in which the action and the performance are submerged in a mythical reality, as symbol and preparation, but open to all that is happening to the actor, answering the symmetry of his step with the symmetry of the soul's step and, whether with resigned, whether with superior feeling, mustering the task . . . I still carried in myself the measure of that completed polarity in which I stood for awhile, like the measure of a passion that supplements everything fragmentary and broken around it to wholeness, rather lets it appear in its wholeness. So my surroundings grew together for me into a community of which I was a member. And thus, no longer as focus and center, but as a member, I experienced the second act of my drama.[14]

My own words cannot compete with the vivid poetry of Buber, yet there is a clear example of this passionate experience Buber describes. In a readers theatre production of Chaucer's <u>Canterbury Tales</u> in which I was involved, a love scene between a young married woman and her lover was performed on a very high ladder (to represent a plum tree), while her older husband wandered about below. After the performance, an elderly gentleman came up to the director and with great agitation and excitement asked how he had created such a realistic and beautiful plum tree. This was not an illusion, but a cojoining of the audience and the characters via the mediation of the literature that provided more than the mere physical attributes of a wooden ladder.

Buber's fourth polarity has a much larger context than the previous three. This fourth polar tension involves the idea of the drama, i.e., the creative work of a poet, and the concept of theatre, i.e., the inner workings of the relationship between actor, play and audience. The tension is created because the actor adds something to the word and the audience adds something to the actor's gestures. Thus, from drama to theatre a change is taking place. On one hand, we have the unspoken symbol, the word which stands by itself. On the other hand, we have the actor's actions, his gestures, which place flesh and physical movement on the word. Both are controlled and filtered by the audience's selectivity. Maurice Friedman, translator and editor of many of Buber's works, says about this drama-theatre tension:

> Drama is pure dialogue which goes over into the spoken. But it is the poet who makes the actor speak. The strength of the poet is the word, the strength of the actor is the gesture. Even speech for the actor is only a kind of gesture, and among early peoples there are no words at all for representation but only the dance. The poet thus is the master of the word, who moves the theatre, and yet never really enters it. Behind each word of each actor, even the most masterful, Daniel could hear the gestureless, unaccented, untouched, the concise and secret, the essential-voiced word of the poem whose determined simplicity the theatre can only draw out, the faithful theatre can only interpret.[15]

This drama/theatre tension takes on crucial importance for interpretation and readers theatre because our avowed purpose is the illustration of literature through voice and body movement. The polar tension is that we "can only interpret."[16] We can draw out what the poet provides us. Often we have forgotten that our talent is not in the creation of the word but in its transmittal. We, as interpreters, flesh the word in our gestures, in our voices, but we do not create the poem. The tension then for the actors must be clearly evident to the director of readers theatre who must

decide what to cut or what to put beside the piece of literature (if he is doing a collage). The concept of dialogue is central to this discussion; the author, the director, and the actor are all different and overagainst one and the other. Yet through the idea of inclusion or total involvement in the standpoint of the other, we see drama develop into theatre.

In the preceding pages, we have seen how the concepts of polarity, dialogue, and inclusion operate within the four polar tensions of the actor overagainst character; actor overagainst actor; actor/play over-against audience; and drama overagainst theatre. We have also heard some examples of the use of these ideas in interpretation and readers theatre. It has not been my purpose to argue whether interpretation is theatre or vice versa. For Buber, clearly, all theatre is interpretation. My purpose is to postulate that the driving central force of interpretation and readers theatre is essentially the same as Buber's concept of polarity/tension, dialogue and inclusion. Polarity is crucial because we are always balancing the tension between the word, the body and the audience. Dialogue is crucial because over the years we have wedded ourselves to the idea that we communicate literature. Inclusion is crucial because as interpreters we not only must totally involve ourselves in the literature, but also in the character of the play or the persona of the poem, as well as the standpoint of the audience.

Buber has said that drama is the formation of word as something that moves between things, "the mystery of word and answer." The mystery is not one of union or harmony, "but of tension, for two men never mean the same thing by the words that they use, and no answer is fully satisfactory."[17]

But through the interweaving of understanding and misunderstanding comes "the interplay of openness and closedness, expression and reserve that mark every genuine dialogue between man and man. Thus the mere fact of the difference between men already implies a basic dramatic entanglement as an inherent component of human existence as such which drama only reproduces in clearer and heightened form."[18]

Maclay has provided us with a grammar of practice; Buber provides us with a framework to practice in. Therefore, it is not necessary for us to achieve successful readers theatre productions by trial and error or by formula combinations of techniques. Buber has provided us with a basis for understanding what we do and justification and support for our intuition.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Leslie Irene Coger, "Interpreter's Theatre: Theatre of the Mind," Q.J.S., April 1963, pp. 157-164.

[2]Just an example of this form is: Leslie Coger and Melvin White, Readers Theatre Handbook, 1973.

[3]Joanna Hawkins Maclay, Readers Theatre: Toward A Grammar of Practice, 1971.

[4]Martin Buber, Daniel: Dialogues on Realization, trans. by Maurice Friedman, 1964, pp. 101-127.

[5]Maurice Friedman, Martin Buber and the Theater, 1969, p. 66.

[6]Martin Buber, Between Man and Man, the essay on "Education", pp. 96ff.

[7]Friedman, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid., p. 13.

[10]Ibid., p. 67.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., pp. 67-68.

[13]Ibid., p. 84.

[14]Ibid., pp. 57-58.

[15]Ibid., p. 15.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., p. 43.

[18]Ibid., p. 44.